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Refusing Success, Refusing “Voice”: The Other Story of Accumulation

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## **Refusing Success, Refusing “Voice”**

### **The Other Story of Accumulation**

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Much of the legitimacy of post-Mao reform is created and reinforced by representations of successful individuals whose talent, personal quality, and efforts seem to be rightfully rewarded by the market economy. The market economy offers opportunities for success for educated elites, as well as shrewd semiliterate peasants. The market economy may not be a wholly fair playing field and the world should not forget those unfortunate migrant women toiling in sweatshop conditions . . . nevertheless, opportunity is a mischievous star glittering in the air for everyone to grab, including those migrant women. Or so it goes. This story sells on both shores of the Pacific, albeit in different ways. Lo, the media in China offers testimonies of a handful who have succeeded against the odds and of many more who vow to follow suit and struggle for success. China’s destiny seems to be cast along the long-tested dialectical line: the future is bright and the path is bumpy. Media in the United States try to balance between an excitement for China’s rapidly opening market and an obligation to lament human rights violations in sweatshops—in other words, between the interests of transnational capital and the interests of liberal human rights groups and U.S.-based unions, and between the capitalist logic of engaging the new Chinese market and the old political logic of anticommunism. Although the balance tips more to one side or the other now and then, exposés about China betray a familiar pattern.

Beneath these hegemonic frameworks that organize our perceptions of reality, migrant workers accumulate subterranean experiences—experiences that cannot be subsumed by these frameworks. They unceasingly accumulate these experiences, which are not only their own but also those of their relatives, friends, and acquaintances. From time to time these experiences may be such an overwhelming and crushing burden that they have to forget in order to live; from time to time these experiences are scattered between the countryside

and the city and are hard to piece together. It may be difficult to say what all this accumulation will amount to, and what kind of quantitative-to-qualitative transformation will give it meaning. But as reform goes on, subterranean experiences keep accumulating in a spectral relationship with that most heralded measure of accumulation, the Gross Domestic Product.

### A SUCCESSFUL MIGRANT WHO REFUSES TO TALK

Hua Min seems to be a successful migrant by the usual criteria. She left her home village in Sichuan for Beijing in 1982. For the first eight years of her migrancy, she worked as a domestic in Beijing, during which time she studied part-time for a tertiary diploma. Not seeing much of a future for herself in Beijing, she went south to Shenzhen in 1992 and found a job as a saleswoman in a telephone company. Her sales record was good enough that she was able to persuade her company to move her household registration from her home village to Shenzhen. In 1997 she moved back to Beijing to be united with her husband, a Beijing resident. By the time we met in 1999, Hua Min was an independent retailer, had an urban household registration, a husband who is a state employee, and a young daughter. Not only could she easily be seen as an individual success story of class mobility, her experience could be easily cited as evidence for the logic of self-development in the market economy—if one intends to develop oneself and is willing to eat all the necessary bitterness in the process, then one can succeed. The logic of self-development is a micrologic of the discourse of development, or the latter is self-development writ large.

The discourses of development and self-development, championed by post-Mao market reformers, are supposed to have rendered class [*jieji*] an invalid analytical category for contemporary Chinese society. A recent publication authored by scholars at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences used *jieceng* [strata] as an analytical category for social classification.<sup>1</sup> *Jieceng* stresses mobility and fluidity. Individual instances of social mobility are also particularly understood as examples that each contain the truth of self-development. Millions of such stories are promoted by the media and, despite a myriad of vicissitudes, tell of a coherent development of the self. I had heard about Hua Min through other migrants and I was curious

what she thought of her own experiences, as she seemed to have all the necessary ingredients for such a story.

Hua Min, however, had subtly tried to avoid talking to me, which I only learned after we became quite familiar. At that time I was slow in following her cues and just kept trying. We did not get a chance for an extended conversation until I waited for almost an hour to meet her in an accidental mix-up. In that first conversation I asked whether she interpreted her story as a “success” story. She thought for a while and replied:

There are many contingent elements in my success. This success is not a necessary [*bi ran*] one. It’s not that once you make all your efforts, you will get it. Moreover, I don’t think all the hardships I have experienced can be balanced off by these things [her successes]. For example, having a diploma doesn’t mean that you can find a job—there are too many with diplomas who cannot find jobs. The reason why I could stay in Beijing is because of my husband, but this affair itself was very fortuitous [*ou ran*].

I came to Beijing seventeen years ago in 1982 and moved to Shenzhen in 1992. It happened to be the year of Deng Xiaoping’s Southern Tour [*nanxun*] and the “bubble economy” was at its hottest. I happened to have the problem of my household registration resolved just before the economy slid downhill. After the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, migrants are having a hard time. It was a coincidence that my household registration was resolved before this bad time. From 1978 to 1983 about 20,000 women came from my county to Beijing. Later village and township enterprises at home attracted most of them back. These days, these enterprises are declining and most of the women come back out again. Of the 20,000, only two of us managed to stay on in Beijing, both because of our Beijing husbands. Two out of 20,000. It’s extremely fortuitous.

Hua Min is aware that the media enthusiastically recruit migrant success stories. She could use her story to “stir-fry” [*chao*] herself, to package herself as “a beautiful bubble” or a model of success to show others and thus to increase her social recognition and value. She has avoided reporters who are eager for such stories. The star migrant in Shenzhen, Anzi, who made her name by “stir-frying” her stories, has built a migrant workers club in Shenzhen. The foundation slogan of Anzi’s migrant club is that “everyone can become the sun” [*ren ren*

*dou keyi cheng wei taiyang*]. Hua Min shook her head over this slogan. She herself once submitted an essay about the bitter experiences of her first year in Beijing to the “dagong Beijing” column of the *Beijing Youth Journal* [*Beijing qingnian bao*]. The essay was not accepted for publication. However, the editor told her that if she would write on the topic of “I married a Beijinger,” it would be printed the next day. Hua Min refused.

### **HUA MIN AND HER SISTERS: SUBTERRANEAN EXPERIENCES**

Hua Min’s refusal of her voice and her insistence that the mainstream representation of her “success” cannot do justice to her experiences pushed me to understand her story as belonging to the category of “subterranean experiences.” These are the experiences of migrant workers that are generated immanently within the market system, minutely, hourly, daily, on and on, unceasingly. They are subterranean because these migrants’ lives, labor, aspirations, and desires are part of the market system, but cannot be justly accounted for by the mainstream discourse of market development. Subterranean experiences accumulate, but such accumulation does not follow the logic of accumulation of *suzhi* (quality), which promises self-development and self-fulfillment in the market economy, as we will see shortly. *Suzhi* is a prominent keyword in post-Mao China and indexes a range of characteristics considered essential for building a developed market-oriented economy and society. The improvement of the quality of the people and of each individual are deemed necessary conditions for national and individual development.<sup>2</sup>

Hua Min is the eldest of three daughters and left her home village in Sichuan in 1982 after finishing high school. Her desire to leave the countryside was shaped by her mother, who was recruited in the 1950s as a young woman to work in the city as a factory worker, and returned to the countryside several years later. Hua Min’s mother saw her return to rural status as a major disappointment. Her stint in the city seemed to have left her deeply alienated from rural life, rural labor, and even from her family. “Mother has envied the city life since then and thinks the rural life is beneath her. Even as a child I felt that my mother was wronged and she shouldn’t have belonged to the countryside and shouldn’t ever have belonged to our humble fam-

ily.” Hua Min learned to view rural life through her mother’s eyes: the countryside is to be escaped.

When Hua Min was in high school in 1980-82, stories of others going to the city as migrants were already circulating. Indeed, some villagers in the commune near the county seat were migrating. After finishing high school and failing the national entrance exam, Hua Min began to participate in rural labor. By this time land had been distributed to sub-team groups, but the commune was not yet dissolved, as it soon would be. Thus labor was still collective, evaluated daily in terms of work points. After land collectivization in the late 1950s, rural society was organized into a three-tiered structure: productive teams, brigades, and communes, with the production team being the basic production and accounting unit. Hua Min caught the tail end of the collective era. However, the national entrance examination system was reinstated shortly after Mao’s passing in 1976. This is a score-based, strictly implemented meritocratic process that selects a minority of high school graduates for tertiary education. Criticized and abolished during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), this system now took the place of the Cultural Revolution practice of selecting candidates for college education from the ranks of workers, peasants, and soldiers (so-called *gongnongbing xue yuan*) on the basis of a range of factors, including the political soundness of individual and local recommendations. After 1977 the reinstated examination system became the main venue through which rural high school students competed among themselves and with urban students for opportunities for higher education and urban state-salaried employment. A rural high school education did not culturally or technically prepare a rural student for rural labor, even though it is likely that she would fail in the national exam for college and end up having to work in the fields anyway. Hua Min’s high school experience in fact had oriented her toward an urban modernity and alienated her from her co-villagers and from rural labor.

Villagers cared about whether you could do well in the field and didn’t care whether you went to high school or not. If you’re capable, they would award you with higher work points. Then I also disliked rural chores [*nong huo*]. So I avoided talking to people and pouted all day long.

The full work points for a day were ten. Hua Min recalled that her sister—who did not go to high school—could earn five, while she herself could only earn three.

Perhaps I didn't have the strength or maybe I just wasn't experienced. If you always lag behind, then others wouldn't think much of you. My younger sister was taller and stronger. She didn't go to high school, but she's good at farm work. All seemed easy for her. I couldn't catch up with her. After my graduation, I wanted to become a bookkeeper. Those days a bookkeeper in the village was already an intellectual. But nobody elected me, because I wasn't good at farm work and seemed incapable. People elected a person with junior high education.

Tempted by the beginning of the migration trend, Hua Min managed to go to Beijing at the end of 1982 through a connection she located—her neighbor had a cousin working in Beijing as a *baomu* [domestic]. So she worked as a *baomu* for the next eight years.

Hua Min's experience of alienation and eventual departure from rural life is representative of many migrants in her generation. She identified strongly with the main character in the 1980s novel *Ren Sheng*, Gao Jialin. The story was about a young intellectual's intimate yet alienated relationship with late-Mao and post-Mao rurality and his efforts to locate his social position and agency. Gao Jialin, like Hua Min a high school graduate who failed the national entrance exam, was devastated after returning to his rural home. When he subsequently lost his teaching position in the village school, the author sighed for him, "*Nongmin* [peasant or farmer]! He knew all their hardship and greatness! Although he never looked down upon any *nongmin*, he had never prepared himself to be one!"<sup>3</sup> Hua Min cried when she read the novel. Other 1980s high school graduates-turned-migrants with whom I have become acquainted also saw themselves in Gao Jialin. Hua Min is a little different from most other migrants of her generation in that she experienced this alienation both through her mother and on her own.

However, as determined as Hua Min was to leave the countryside, in her subsequent years as a migrant worker she developed a strong sense of migrant rurality. For Hua Min, this rurality is built on her familiar experiences of rural life, but is not based on a nostalgia or romanticism of the countryside, nor is it place-based. In fact, Hua

Min has more critical observations than many migrants about the limitations of the rural community. Her sense of rurality is a migrant rurality, reflected in her bitter observation that “there is no future for us in the city, but there is no place for us to return to in the countryside.” She obtained this perception through a series of hardships mixed with hope, disappointment, and radical disorientation. By 1988, six years after her arrival in Beijing, Hua Min had worked for a number of families as a domestic. She began to worry about her future. At the time a fever to learn English was spreading in the city and a number of schools came into existence, promising to provide English education and grant diplomas. Hua Min thought if she acquired a diploma in Beijing, she could be an English teacher in her home village. She was willing to go back to be a teacher, because that is still better than being a *baomu* in the city. “It’s honorable to be a teacher. You know there is no future for a domestic in the city.” With this plan in mind, Hua Min spent the next three years working part time and going to classes. She borrowed money to pay tuition and, whenever she could, she worked as a part-time domestic in exchange for free room and/or board. Sometimes when she could not find a place to stay, she would sneak into the classroom at night and sleep on the desks. During these three years Hua Min always had a sleep deficit, skipped meals from time to time, and was often half-starved. With little cash income, she even had to ask for money from her parents sometimes, instead of remitting money home. In order to support Hua Min’s education and subsidize her parents, Hua Min’s youngest sister Hua Jie went to Shenzhen to find work.

Of all the women from her county working as domestics in Beijing, nobody else tried to go to school. Her migrant friends often praised her, but they doubted what she could do with this education. Hua Min herself was sometimes doubtful too, suspecting that she was deluding herself. At the end of the three years, she was not only in debt but did not even get a diploma, because it was ruled that the school was only informally set up by a few professors of a certain university and was not formally attached to or acknowledged by that university. Nevertheless, Hua Min returned home to try to begin a teaching career, but there was no job for her. Her father had grown bitter working as a substitute teacher: substitute teachers are worked to exhaustion and take the rap while reaping no benefits. Even though Hua Min was willing to take such a job, she could not find



one. She thought about looking for a teaching position in a poorer mountainous area, but she had no contacts whatsoever. Then it was 1991. Local village enterprises worked by fits and starts and lacked contracts. Women working for these factories were sent home some days and were called back to work some other days.

Hua Min was lost over what she could do in the countryside while feeling the heavy burden of sacrifice that her parents and sister had made for her education. Her parents urged her to go out again. "Actually my parents didn't quite know about the situation for me in the city. They tended to think that it should be better to stay outside than at home. Actually it's not necessary the case. But I didn't want to argue. Is it easy in the city? Will there be a future for me in the city? Then I almost hated my parents for pushing me out." Leaving home again, Hua Min felt very disoriented and lost, that she had no place in either the city or the countryside. At this point she decided to try the southern city of Shenzhen.

While staying in Shenzhen's cheapest hotel for two weeks and having only a few yuan left in her pocket, Hua Min found a job as a cleaner in a telephone company. The timing turned out to be optimal. At the peak of the bubble economy created by Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992, she was recruited to assist with the company's expanding sales work by becoming a sales agent. Before the bubble deflated, she had managed to relocate her household registration from her home village to the city. After she secured this job, her boyfriend's family, who were based in Beijing, encouraged the couple to marry. But Shenzhen also brought tragedy. One of her eyes was seriously and permanently damaged on a sales trip when an elastic strap on her luggage snapped and its metal hook hit her. It was also in Shenzhen that her five-month-old fetus died in her exhausted body, resulting in a difficult abortion and three years of subsequent Chinese medical treatments. When she was able to conceive again in 1997, Hua Min had to be hospitalized due to the risks involved. Her savings were thus wiped clean and, in 1997, she once more had nothing. She then moved back to Beijing to be reunited with her husband and, after her daughter was born, she found work in Beijing as a retailer.

Hua Min's sense of migrant rurality grew out of her predicament and hardships. But more than a sense of distress, migrant rurality for Hua Min is also an assertion of an identity with the interests of rural

migrant workers and her understanding of the troubles, misery, frustration, and aspirations of her fellow migrants. Her own eight years of experience as a domestic affirmed what she learned through her native place-based network of *baomu*: “Our interests and those of employers are at odds. Employers always would like us to work more, but we hope to work less. Employers would consider you a good *baomu* if you know your position and act according to that knowledge, but it is the very position of *baomu* that is oppressive. After eight years of being a *baomu*, I had a very inferior sense of myself and couldn’t hold my head up.” While in Beijing she associated with women migrants from her own native place, and, after moving on to Shenzhen in 1992, she interacted with many migrants from other provinces whom she encountered on the job. During her five long years of struggles on her own in Shenzhen, she enjoyed hanging out with other migrants. She liked to hear their stories, to learn where they came from, and to find out what had become of them. She breathed more freely when she was with other migrants. “What will become of our group, the migrant women?” she wondered in the 1990s.

Recent events in her immediate and extended family increasingly troubled Hua Min and pushed her to question the meaning of reform for migrant workers, like her siblings, and for the countryside. After working in a beauty parlor in Shenzhen for more than ten years, Hua Min’s youngest sister, Hua Xin, had recently quit her job and returned to their native place. Ever since I became familiar with Hua Min, she had expressed worries about Hua Xin from time to time, as Hua Xin often complained about headaches and insomnia. “The pressure on her is just too much.” Whenever Hua Min spoke on the phone with her, Hua Xin talked about her problems—problems at work and problems with successive boyfriends. Hua Xin had begun to work for the boss of the beauty parlor when she was in her early 20s. At most, her wage was 8,000 yuan a month. To have a certain security for the future, she bought a small apartment in Shenzhen. As she grew older, the boss increasingly found fault with her. She did not bring as much profit as before. But to pay her mortgage, she had to keep her monthly income above a certain minimum. Hua Xin always wanted a wealthy boyfriend to achieve some security. But Hua Min said that Hua Xin could not attain the high and would not settle for the low.

For more than ten years everyday she has associated with rich clients. She identified with their world. But how could wealthy men be seriously interested in a rural migrant woman? Yet she would not be interested in migrant men of her own class, because she looks down on them and just couldn't see herself as one of them. The older she is, the more anxious she is.

Hua Min worried that her youngest sister might just snap one day, and indeed Hua Xin eventually quit her job. When the boss reduced her wage to only 800 yuan a month, one-tenth of what she had earned ten years earlier, she had a fight with the boss and quit her job. Unemployed, single, and in her mid-30s, Hua Xin returned to her native place where she moved in with her other sister, Hua Yu.

Hua Yu lives in the county seat with her two children. Her husband has worked as a salesman for a township and village enterprise (TVE). For a period in the 1980s, when TVEs were doing well, the husband had a good income. So, like prosperous villagers, the family bought an apartment and moved to the county seat. Hua Yu thus quit farm labor and became an urban housewife. But after the mid-1990s TVEs came under stress. Working as a sales representative for one of them, the husband was compelled to spend most of his time in Fujian. During this period, Hua Yu found out that he had found a lover there. Fights ensued and resulted in divorce. Hua Yu is now alone raising the two children and has no independent source of income.

Hua Min's parents were very angered by both daughters, especially Hua Xin. They scolded her as useless and said she brought all her troubles onto herself. Hua Min disagreed, reasoning that the parents were unthinkingly following mainstream value and judgment. "More than ten years working for her boss and my youngest sister was kicked out! Eight hundred yuan is basically forcing her to leave." Hua Min's parents now live with her in Beijing. In their old age, the parents are retired from agricultural labor and are reluctant to go back. Some people in the village have been dying of cancer. The lake in the village was contracted to an entrepreneur for fish farming, and now some villagers have flush toilets, which are flushed out into the river. Both the lake and river water, which used to be potable, have been badly contaminated. Nobody knows for sure whether the cancer is related to water pollution, but people are afraid. Hua Xin reported after a recent trip to the village that it is quite deserted and some houses, including theirs, were surrounded by overgrown

grass. Hua Min would like to persuade her parents to go back and help the two sisters. If the parents could look after Hua Yu's children, then she can look for a job. But Hua Min is not sure whether her parents will be convinced.

Didn't some rural migrants get rich? In Hua Min's extended family there is one: her own maternal uncle in another village, Li Wei. Li Wei was a migrant construction worker in the 1980s. Rather quickly he turned himself into a contractor [*bao gong tou*], recruiting other villagers as migrants for urban construction projects. While the migrants he recruited were paid fixed wages, Li Wei had a flexible income from commissions and became a very rich man. Hua Min asks, "But out of how many migrants can there be a rich man? How many hundreds of migrants worked hard and were paid no more than a few yuan a day, so that my uncle and his family got rich?!" The uncle is known and disliked by villagers in surrounding villages. Hua Min's mother used to worry about visits from his family. They would come in cars and make a big fuss. It was not easy to feed and entertain his family.

While still in middle school, Hua Min used to be very fond of and looked forward to Li Wei's visits, before he took on the construction work. Her uncle was a very worldly and humorous man. Once he came for a visit and left without staying for a meal. Hua Min very much wanted to stretch his visit longer and ran after him for a long way to urge him to stay. When she finally caught up with him, her uncle gave her one yuan and told her to go back. Hua Min bought a pen with that one yuan, which she used for the rest of her years in middle and high school. "I have always remembered this experience." But Hua Min noted that years later, when she was a migrant worker in Beijing and heard about her uncle's plan to visit the city, she avoided him. She did not want her uncle to pity her or look down upon her. She also knew she could not offer him help in Beijing. "How different it has become! While before I ran a long way after him to make him stay for a meal, later I tried to stay away from him. My uncle himself doesn't seem to understand why people stay away from him. He wept to my father."

One of Hua Min's cousins recently killed himself by drowning in the village river. The young man, Chen Jiabao, was the only son of her maternal aunt. The aunt and her husband are ordinary peasants and rather poor. Their son worked for Li Wei for a few years in the

city. Li Wei and his children had everything, while Jiabao had very little. So Jiabao aspired to be like them. After Jiabao returned to the countryside, he persuaded his parents to give him money to start a business in the city. Several months later he returned, after having squandered his parents' money. He begged his parents again, promising that he would do better this time. His parents did not believe him, but they could not ignore his pestering. The poor parents parted with their savings and gave it to him for the last time. Yet he lost it again this time—he was cheated out of his money by swindlers. He was so scared that he did not return to his parents directly, but stayed with his grandparents instead. The grandparents persuaded him to go back and ask for his parents' forgiveness. He went back and knelt in front of his parents. His father was so furious that he told him to get out and that he would not care if he were dead. Jiabao then went to the river. Hua Min was deeply saddened by the community's response to his suicide:

Some villagers saw him wandering at the bank for quite a while. But no villager tried to pull him back. It's as if people didn't care and were fine with him dead. That's chilling. My aunt and her husband were devastated at the loss of their son. What has become of the countryside?

As Hua Min related, out of the 20,000 migrant women from her county who came to Beijing more or less around the same time, two managed to stay on through marriage. The other woman used to nag Hua Min, "People who can manage it try to jump out of the migrant women [*dagongmei*] circle. But you are the opposite: you are always into it." Hua Min relayed this to me and smiled, "I don't know why. I always stand on the side of a migrant woman. Cannot help it." Her perception of the injustice she has experienced, as well as her siblings and her many migrant friends, has shaped Hua Min's deep identity as a migrant woman, her sense of migrant rurality, and her identification with other migrant workers. For Hua Min to produce her story as a showcase of development would be a betrayal of her critical understanding of her experiences and experiences of men and women she has witnessed. She refuses to "stir-fry" herself or to be "stir-fried." She avoids journalists. She refuses to lend her "voice" to mainstream discourses.

## ARE NGOS PLAYING GONG LI? REPRESENTATION AND VENTRILOQUISM

The problem of representation that had troubled Hua Min brings up the question of the subaltern voice. Gayatri Spivak's famous polemic regarding the representation of subaltern consciousness claimed ultimately that "the subaltern cannot speak."<sup>4</sup> This provocative but difficult piece of analysis has remained underappreciated, by and large. Many social scientists find it counterintuitive, since in our field research we surely come into contact with speaking subalterns all the time. Social scientists also find it unsettling, because surely our research papers are filled with voices that we transport back from the field as data. We typically build the validity of our analysis on the basis of the validity and truthfulness of these voices, presuming ourselves to be objective and transparent as we do so.

Is there an objective subaltern voice? Voices of course exist all the time, but they do not exist naturally as pristine data waiting for collection. They are produced in social contexts and in intersubjective processes. Moreover, they are produced within the frames of the worldviews of the speaker and the investigator. How the speaker understands and interprets his or her situation within what kind of worldview shapes how she or he represents her or his experiences and thus the story told. During the mobilization for land reform and social revolution, poor peasants learned to reinterpret the unfortunate events in their lives in terms of "class" rather than "fate." The act of "speaking bitterness" was not a natural, but a political, process of coming to a consciousness through performative speech. When Xi'er at the end of the revolutionary play *White-Haired Girl* was encouraged to speak out against her suffering, she cried out, "I'll speak, I'll speak, I will speak!" to a community in transformation. The very possibility of the urge to speak was enabled by a revolution that transformed the local context: the striking down of the local landlord and the imminent land reform that returned land to the tillers. Thus said, speaking in terms of "fate" or "the individual responsible for her self" is nothing natural either, but is a result of long-term everyday socialization. The fact that this process of socialization may be invisible to us does not mean that it is natural. Thus, "speaking" is not a natural or objective process.

The consciousnesses of migrants have mediated relationships with the larger structure of political economy, as well as with the complex local histories from which they come. Our analysis thus should not begin with the voice as the given, but should plot the politics of the mediations of their coming to voice. Hua Min's withholding of her voice and Anzi's corporate production of subaltern voice through her migrant workers club mentioned earlier compel us to question not only whether subalterns can speak, but also—when the popular and academic media endlessly offer us “voices” of the subaltern—how subalterns “speak.” Speaking is a sociopolitical act.

Spivak's polemical commentary calls into question both the essentialist notion of voice and the transparency of both the subaltern speaker and the investigator. The investigator is always a sociopolitical being. Whenever she represents a voice, she transposes it into an ideological frame. She cannot help it, even though she may not be intellectually aware of her or his own ideology. As James Kavanagh reminds us in his essay “Ideology,” “There is no such thing as a social discourse that is non-ideological. . . . One's insistence that s/he (or a given text) is ‘non-ideological’ because s/he (or it) disavows any coherent political theory is as silly as would be one's insistence that s/he is ‘non-biological’ because s/he has no coherent theory of cell formation.”<sup>5</sup> However, being “objective” and “non-ideological” is the very value through which mainstream social science establishes its authority in reform China. In the 1990s, “migrant labor” and “migrant population” may be *the* field of social investigation that instrumentally allowed mainstream social science quickly to reshape itself and assert its authority in reform-era China. In this process, the data collection of migrant voices has been a critical exercise of asserting the positivist and objective authority of social science. In the last several years, however, the publications of migrant stories and voices have subtly but fashionably stressed liberal humanist values. One wonders whether the new attention to and use of migrant voices corresponds with the proliferation of nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and the growing NGO funding for social science in China.

Hua Min likes the story of the film *Qiuju da guan si* (The Story of Qiuju).<sup>6</sup> She likes to see films about the rural areas, but they are becoming rare these days, even though the majority of the Chinese population is still rural. In the vein of “the subaltern cannot speak,” Hua Min protested, “After the film and the sensation, Qiuju is still

Qiuju. She is still the rural woman who remains forgotten. It's Gong Li, the actress, who got all the attention and fame." Hua Min's protest gave me pause. As "rural women," "migrant women," and "migrant workers" are increasingly becoming targets for transnational foundations, the number of NGOs claiming to speak for "rural women," "migrant women," and "migrant workers" in China is growing. The demonstrated ability and the act of speaking for these subaltern groups is a critical asset for these NGOs. A conference on migrant women can easily obtain tens of thousands of yuan in funding. Can these groups avoid being Gong Li ventriloquizing Qiuju?

Unceasingly, subterranean experiences keep accumulating. Hua Min's questions, "What will become of us, the migrant women?" and "What has become the countryside" arise from such subterranean experiences. My encounters with Hua Min pushed me to ask: If we are familiar with the logic of GDP accumulation, then what is the trajectory of subterranean accumulation? What will become of it?

## NOTES

1. Lu Xueyi et al. 2002.
2. For logic of *suzhi* and of self-development, and how it has been used to mobilize migrant women, see Yan 2003.
3. Lu Yao 1995, p. 6.
4. Spivak 1988.
5. Kavanagh 1995, p. 311.
6. Zhang Yimou 1993.

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